

The Upside Down Games by literaphobe

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-03-16

Updated: 2017-04-05

Packaged: 2022-04-02 00:28:31

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 4

Words: 17,203

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Hunger Games AU. Everything is the same- except instead of Hawkins, Indiana, they all live in District 12.

Mike Wheeler lives in the Victor's Village, thanks to his sister Nancy who won the games when she was 14 years old, allowing the Wheelers to live in the lap of luxury- or as luxurious as living in District 12 can get.

Sadly, having a sister as a victor doesn't protect Mike from the reaping. It also doesn't protect him from getting picked to represent District 12 in the 83rd Hunger Games.

Oh, and the thing about the arena that year? It becomes another dimension at night. It becomes the Upside Down.

1. The Reaping

Author's Note:

I just watched Stranger Things in its entirety for the first time last Saturday I am dead pls like this and tell me what you think!!

A month after Eleven vanishes from their lives indefinitely, Mike Wheeler is standing in the middle of his bedroom, getting dressed for his first reaping. A sense of dread settles over him, a sense of dread that's settled over the entire Wheeler residence since the break of dawn. It's the day of his first reaping. Mike wishes he could've stayed eleven forever.

You also wish you could've stayed with Eleven forever, don't you? A sardonic part of him thinks.

He hears footsteps approaching his door, and with the knowledge that it's almost time to leave, Mike shrugs on a jacket as his mother opens the door.

Her eyes are swollen.

"Mike? Breakfast is ready." Karen gently informs before she turns around and leaves. Mike nods and follows her out, closing the door behind him. A small part of him fears this might be the last time he shuts it.

He steps back into his room, admiring all his science fair trophies one last time. Even the third place trophy. He looks at the picture the school took of him, Lucas, Dustin, and Will. He's struck with the reminder that he has no pictures with or of Eleven. What if... she came back one day and he was gone?

He shoves that thought away and half-heartedly plays with all his toys out of spite, in case it's the last time. His Yoda figurine, his dinosaur Rory. He lets Rory roar and Mike smiles. It's a small one though, and doesn't quite stretch to the ends of his face.

He hears his mother yell his name and decides to finally leave his room or he'll have no time for breakfast. As he rushes out, he almost bumps into Nancy. She's completely dolled up in a new dress and earrings that her stylist brought over early in the morning.

The two siblings look up at each other. No words are exchanged, but their weary eyes that couldn't sleep a wink the night before say everything. Nancy pulls Mike into a tight hug, and he has to bite his lips to keep from crying.

Holly's eating small bites of waffles that Karen cuts up for her. She's not bouncing around in her chair as energetically as she usually does every morning. She's never had to attend a reaping, and is too young to understand what's going on. But still Holly's slightly brought down by the atmosphere, and Mike thinks about how his sweet, albeit sometimes annoyingly cranky little sister, will one day have to attend a reaping too.

Mike sees Eggo's waffles on his plate, and frankly it makes him lose his appetite even more. But he knows his mother's worried enough, so he forces a few bites down.

"Alright. It's time." Mike hears Nancy's stylist announce. Usually this reminder's only for Nancy, who has to attend the reaping every year. His father grunts and puts down his newspaper, getting ready to leave. They head for the town's square by car, which Mike isn't sure whether to be grateful for or not. No matter how stylish his entrance, if his name gets called, he still has to enter the games.

His parents and Holly are to wait at the side during the reaping, as usual for any other citizens not qualified to partake in the games. He's at the back with all the other twelve year olds, and quickly finds his friends. Lucas, Dustin, and Will all look just as dreadful as he does. No one says a word. He notes how they're all dressed casually. Mike isn't wearing anything too fancy either. It's to give them hope that they won't be going anywhere apart from home after the reaping.

They all each only have one single paper slip in that huge glass bowl for the boys. Technically, the odds are in their favor. Their families are not in severe poverty, definitely not poor enough for them to add

their names more times in exchange for tessera. There are other boys in their district who have up to thirty slips of paper in that giant bowl. Thirty slips to their one. Thousands of entries, with only one belonging to each of them.

But still, there's that fear. That *what if*.

On stage, all three chairs are filled. One with their mayor, one with District 12's escort, and the last with his sister, Nancy. She looks nervous, as she always does every year, except more so this time. Mike understands perfectly. She's been District 12's only living victor and thus only mentor since she won the games three years ago. It's her younger brother's first reaping. Anyone would be nervous.

Once the clock strikes two, their mayor goes up to the podium for his annual speech. Mike sighs, already bored, and looks to his friends. Losing any of them would kill him. He remembers what a source of strength they had been when Nancy was chosen to be in the 80th Hunger Games. He remembers how they all cried together when she emerged victorious. He looks at her again, fiddling with the hem of her dress, just as tired of the mayor's speech as everyone is, and thinks to himself how fortunate he is to have such a warrior for a sister.

By some miracle, the mayor finally finishes speaking, and District 12's escort stands up, bubbly as ever.

"Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor."

She chooses the female tribute first, as always. This year, it's some 18 year old who immediately screams and tries to run. She's grabbed by some peacekeepers and hauled up stage. Mike pities her. It was her last reaping after all.

And then it's time to choose the male tribute. Mike's dread spreads throughout his entire being and he gulps nervously. Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will hold hands. Whatever happens during a reaping is not mocked or discussed by anyone after the reaping ends. Mike can even see Troy a few rows in front, silently crying his eyes out. He feels no pity for Troy, however.

He's so distracted by his fear he doesn't hear it. His friends look completely taken aback and are looking at him suddenly, tears starting to settle in their eyes.

And that's when he hears it.

"Mike Wheeler."

2. The Promise

Notes for the Chapter:

ahhh I really hope you guys like this!!

mike and nancy are closer in this than they are in canon bc your sister surviving the hunger games really makes you wanna hold on to her tight

also comments and kudos are much appreciated!!

The steps Mike takes towards the stage are probably the hardest steps he's ever had to take in his life. Quite possibly, even harder than the steps he had to take out of the classroom when Eleven vanished. He remembers how he cried then, how he screamed, begged for her to come back. His friends had tried to drag him out, and in the end he had to be hauled over someone's shoulder and brought to the back of a hospital van to get treated.

Right now, however, he hasn't made a single sound. His eyes are dry, actually. Maybe it's the shock. Either way, it's a good thing he isn't crying. Nancy didn't cry when she was reaped for the Hunger Games, and neither was he going to. His friends are all trying to be strong, but behind his back Mike hears muffled sniffles.

A silence has settled in the town square, as always when a twelve year old is forced to join the games. Which as statistics have shown is basically a death sentence. He knows no one is going to volunteer to take his place. Dustin, Lucas, and Will all keep quiet, which he doesn't resent them for because the last thing Mike wants is for any of them to try and take his place. It's not like they'd have a better chance of surviving the games anyway. And if they had volunteered to take Mike's place and died, Mike thinks he'd probably never forgive himself.

Mike slowly looks up on stage and Nancy's eyes are swollen. He can tell that she's doing everything in her power to stop herself from crying. He tries not to do anything to make it worse for her. He quickens his footsteps, because really- *no one* is going to volunteer to

take his place. He knows he's the icon of pity now, but it's not like he has an older brother who can take his place. And who would give up their life for a complete stranger or mere acquaintance?

Mike stands in his allocated spot on stage, and shakes the female tribute's hand. She's already in tears, and looking at her sorry state Mike feels more confident that not crying was the right choice. The mayor then starts in on the Treaty of Treason. Mike ignores it and blankly stares at the crowd. His friends are all crying much more blatantly now, and he feels so very sorry for putting them through the stress of seeing someone they love and care for so much get sent to their death. He sees his mother crying into his father's shoulder, and little Holly scared and on the verge of tears. Seeing this nearly brings on the waterworks, but he holds it in. He's a bit surprised at how strong he's being, how well he's handling this horrible situation. But maybe he's much more similar to Nancy Wheeler than he thinks.

The anthem of Panem plays just as he sees his sister start to full on cry her eyes out. He wonders to himself if she was smart enough to wait until the blaring music could drown out the sound of her voice to cry, or if they played the anthem to cover up the tears of his loved ones. He can't really tell, because honestly Mike's feeling very numb to everything that's currently happening, and maybe that numbness is all that's keeping him together.

The music fades out and Mike is marched through the front doors of the Justice Building by two peacekeepers. He knows he has one hour to say goodbye to his family and friends, because he's done this before with Nancy. The only thing different this time is that he's not just bidding farewell to one person.

The first group to burst through the door are Dustin, Lucas, and Will. They all force him into a group hug and he hugs them back, biting his lip so that he doesn't cry. It's really tempting though, because his friends are all bawling.

"Please come back." Will pleads, but Mike can't promise that.

"You can win, can't you? Just like Nancy did." Dustin says, and that fact actually gives Mike a bit of hope.

"Maybe," he says, and although he hasn't been crying at all his voice feels rather hoarse.

"Yeah, she can- she can teach you." Lucas nods, determined about this. "You'll make history, the both of you."

"I promise I'll try." He clears his throat. "If- if she ever comes back-"

The others are a little taken aback by the indirect mention of Eleven. Of course, no names are used but who else would Mike be talking about?

"If she ever comes back you'll be *here* to see her for yourself." Will says, and Mike feels horrible for bringing her up because it makes this goodbye to his friends seem insincere. He hadn't said anything about Eleven for a month, and now it suddenly must seem like the only thing he supposedly cares about.

"I'll try, I'll really try to come back- for all of you. In a few months we could be playing another campaign. A much cooler one- because the Capitol will give me anything I want if I win. The latest Dungeons and Dragons board game-"

"All the Star Wars figurines." Dustin interjects with a bittersweet grin.

"A better dinosaur-" Lucas teases.

"Hey! Rory is the best and you know it." Mike retorts and they all laugh, for what might be the last time. It's a tired, weary, and maybe even slightly forced laughter, but it's what they all need right now.

"But you know we don't care about all that right? Just come back, please." Will says, and then he embraces Mike.

They all take turns to hug Mike one by one and then there's a knock on the door, a Peacekeeper who informs them with his presence that their time is up.

"I love you guys." Mike says, no matter how cringeworthy or weird it feels. Because it might be his last chance to say it.

"We love you, Mike!" They all yell back uncoordinatedly as they're

escorted out.

Mike sits down on this velvet chair as he takes in the bright room around him. He wonders how Nancy must've felt when it had been her, sitting in this very room, or at least a room similar to this one.

The next people to barge in are his parents. And Holly. He hugs his mother first, then Holly, who's calmed down but her face is still stained with tears. He gives his sister a kiss on the cheek, and she returns him a slobbery one. He doesn't wipe it off, because this could very well be the last kiss he gets from his baby sister. His heart aches at the thought that she might grow up barely knowing who he was.

He thinks about Nancy again, about how his mom was only pregnant with Holly at the time. How she must've worried she might never live to see her baby sister for the first time.

"We love you so much, baby." His mother tells him as she cradles her face.

"I really want to cry right now," he informs her. "But Nancy didn't and..."

"Don't cry." His father tells him. "You'll have plenty of time to do that in the train. There are too many cameras outside. Don't mark yourself as a weakling, son."

Mike thinks that he's probably already been marked as a weakling, being a small twelve year old boy and all. Would a few tears really make matters worse? But he's come so far, crying would feel synonymous with admitting defeat. And that's the last thing he wants to do.

After all, Nancy had been a small fourteen year old girl. Tears or no tears, her small physique had already allowed her to be underestimated. But still she had not cried, and so just like his older sister he's not going to cry in front of the cameras.

"We love you." His mother reminds him. "And we'll do everything we can to try and bring you back home."

He takes turns hugging each of them just like he did with his friends,

and almost too soon they hear that dreadful knock on their door.

"I love you all too." He says as they're escorted out. And then his chest tightens at the look on his mother's face as the door slams behind them.

No one else comes in after that. Mike didn't really expect anyone else to. He wonders for a moment if Mr Clark would've visited him. Maybe his teacher wanted to, but at the same time what could he have said?

A Peacekeeper leads Mike to a car where the female tribute is already waiting. Mike feels bad that he hasn't caught her name yet, but he supposes there's more than enough time to learn it. She's stopped crying for now, so maybe she's trying to be strong too. It's a short ride to the train station and neither of them say a word to each other. Mike only wonders when he'll finally get to see Nancy. She's not in the car with them, but he knows she'll have to be on the train that takes them to the Capitol at least.

Cameras flash at Mike and the female tribute when they get down from the car. Neither of them make any attempts to smile. Mike restrains himself from making a run for it when they're told they can finally board the train. He rubs his eyes because the glare of flash light truly is a pain.

And then he hears his name being called.

"Mike!"

He turns around and runs immediately towards the sound of that voice, because he'd know his sister's voice anywhere. When he's in Nancy's arms again, a hug much more desperate and painful than the one they shared mere hours ago is exchanged.

This is the moment that Mike chooses to start crying. As he starts to bawl his eyes out, Nancy follows him mere seconds after, and their cries are heard in echoes along the corridors of the train as it begins to chug its way down the tracks, heading straight for the Capitol.

Finally, they calm down enough to seek refuge in one of the

chambers. Mike doesn't know whether it's his or Nancy's, but he doesn't care, either way.

"I'm sorry." Is the first thing Nancy says as she shuts the door behind her. "It's all my fault."

Mike's confused, but of course Nancy would somehow blame herself for this. There's always talk about how the reappings are rigged, and though that's true to some extent, given how many instances of past victors' siblings and children have gotten sent into those arenas, there's no way Mike's letting Nancy blame herself for this.

"It's not your fault, Nancy. Even if the reaping was rigged, it's the Capitol's fault, not yours."

Nancy shakes her head, and she's tearing up again. "No, you don't get it. I- I made them angry."

"How?"

Nancy gulps and averts her gaze, as if wondering if this is something she should really share.

"Nancy, whatever it is, just tell me."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay. You see- the Capitol treats us victors like objects. They want us to do whatever they want. And... sometimes some victors are forced to perform- services. For a price. For rich Capitol folk."

Mike has an inkling of what she's talking about, and his blood runs cold.

"Last year, they asked me to start doing... that. They said I'd get paid money, that my family would live very comfortably and... happily."

"But we're perfectly comfortable and happy!" He protests, as if arguing with Nancy over a past decision would help matters.

"That's... that's what I told them. I said no, there was no way I'd let anyone touch me if I didn't want it. I said I didn't care how high their price was."

Mike feels relieved at this.

"But- I didn't think... I didn't think about the price I'd- *you'd* have to pay because I refused to do what they said... I should've-"

"No!" Mike shakes his head. "No, Nancy, you had no idea, and-"

"It's all my fault!" She chokes on her tears, and Mike pulls her into a hug.

"I would have volunteered as tribute for the games myself if it meant no one would... do anything to you."

Nancy hugs him back, and she calms down but she's still sniffing. "You're the best brother I could've ever asked for, you know that?"

"Of course I am," Mike teases, and they pull apart just in time for him to see her roll her eyes at him affectionately. "But remember- it's not your fault and besides, we can get back at them."

"How?" Nancy asks, and this time Mike almost rolls his eyes, but decides against it.

"By winning. You won the games when you were fourteen. We all saw you take down that dude from District 1. You can teach me."

Nancy takes all this in, and truly considers this possibility. That this... situation, as bad as it seems, doesn't have to end in misery and suffering.

"You're right. We're Wheelers. And I promise you Mike- I'll do everything in my power to bring you back from that arena alive."

Mike cracks a small smile, and it's the most hopeful he's felt all day.

"I'll try my best to come back from that arena alive too."

3. The Elevens

Notes for the Chapter:

A quick BTW about this AU- the District 12 in this fic is way more well off than the District 12 in the actual HG.

And this chapter is like... more than twice the length of the first and second chapters combined lmao!! Please enjoy this and comments and kudos are v much appreciated!!

Also an alternate title for this chapter is "how many times can someone make a reference to eleven in front of mike, because the universe just wants to screw with him, and in this context the universe is me"

Eventually, Mike and Nancy make their way to the dining room, where their escort and the female tribute is waiting.

"Tuck in, kids." Their escort says kindly. Mike doesn't know her name, and finds it too awkward to ask. Their escort is friendly and nice, although her hair shade is a tad too neon yellow for his liking. It feels very glaring to look at her.

Mike observes the spread before him and... doesn't feel hungry at all. He takes his seat and checks out every single dish on the table. There's some sort of stew. Piles of baked goods ranging from bagels to croissants. Fresh salad that no one has touched yet. Cubes of carefully cut fruits sit in glass bowls. He sees several cuts of steak and way too many sausages.

He still doesn't feel hungry, but he supposes that's not a surprise. Mike recalls the year Nancy was reaped for the Hunger Games, how it had been her third reaping, and the past two years she was lucky for they went home with relieved smiles and tucked into delicious spreads of food their mother spent hours cooking to celebrate their family's small, temporary victory.

And then that third year, Nancy's gone, and when they reach home Mike goes straight to bed and cries for hours. He doesn't sleep that night and he hears his mother crying to his father about how she shouldn't have gotten pregnant again because what if the universe was forcing her to trade one child for another?

Nancy wins though, so whatever sick joke the universe wanted to make they completely fail to make it stick.

Every year after that, Nancy leaves again after every reaping day with whichever unlucky boy and girl who got picked to die. Well, more accurately, kill or be killed. When Nancy leaves, Mike often goes without dinner that night because he's upset about not getting to see his older sister for several weeks; although Nancy going away to be a mentor isn't nearly as bad as Nancy going away to be a tribute. Not by a long shot.

And that's why Mike's not hungry right now, probably, because he never eats this time of day, at this time of the year. Maybe it also has something to do with how he hasn't felt hungry all day, and somehow the knowledge that in about a week he's to be forced into an arena where he'll very likely die isn't making him very ravenous.

"Mike?" Mike nearly jerks and looks up to see Nancy, her face stricken with worry for him. She isn't eating much either though, and as far as he's concerned she's only had a few sips of broth. But he's made her worried enough for the day already, so Mike gulps down some broth too.

"Get some sleep, all of you." Their escort reminds them when they're finished with dinner. "We'll reach the Capitol tomorrow morning, 11 at the latest."

Mike winces, and then hates himself for it. Over the course of the entire month since she vanished, Mike can't help but react every time he sees, hears, or even says anything that hints at that number. Her name. He'd be doing simple math sums and pause every time he saw 11. He'd be bored in class with the textbook open on his desk and he'd realize they were on page 11. He'd look at his watch and every time two ones appeared on the screen Mike would sigh and then hate himself for being so sensitive.

Heck, someone could say 'onety-one' and Mike would flinch at the thought of her. No, not just the thought of her. The thought that she's gone and he doesn't know how to bring her back. And as he's hurting because of this any mention or reference to her stings like an untreated wound.

They go into a separate compartment in the train to rewatch the reaping. Their escort leaves, possibly to get a head start on that good night's sleep she recommended. So it's just Mike, Nancy, and that female tribute. He feels bad for not knowing her name again, but hey- he'll find out soon so there's that.

As usual, the Career tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4 are all built and look like they could snap Mike's neck in a split second. Many of them even volunteered for the games, so it's highly probable that they're sadistic bloodthirsty creatures who can't wait to murder other kids. Especially a tiny twelve year old like himself.

Mike wonders if there'll be another twelve year old this year too. Or at least another thirteen year old, but everyone looks incredibly old. In fact, as far as he's concerned, the second youngest tribute this year is already sixteen. It's horrible how they all look well-fed, relatively strong and much, *much* bigger and taller than Mike.

Not that he thinks he'd be able to beat a twelve or thirteen year old in a fight to the death, but his chances of surviving against someone of his size and age are much better than facing off with one of those Career tributes. The thought of having to do that makes Mike shudder.

A girl whom Mike presumes to be around his age except she seems even tinier than him actually gets called from District 11- and he's almost haunted because with her buzzcut and gentle gaze she bears a striking resemblance to Eleven. *His* Eleven. Not like she belongs to him or anything but the tightness in his chest that threatens to squeeze his insides until it reduces to nothingness as Mike watches the frail girl hesitantly step out- that belongs to him entirely.

He doesn't dwell too much on how that Eleven lookalike hails from District Eleven. It's one too many Eleven references in his life for the day and Mike's half sure the universe is messing with him. Someone

volunteers to take that scrawny girl's place and Mike's relieved even though this means he has to face yet another eighteen year old that might potentially kill him in the arena.

Then they move on to District 12 and Mike's ears train out for the female tribute's name. When he hears it though, he almost wants to unhear it because this has *got* to be painful for Nancy.

You see... District 12's female tribute for the 83rd Hunger Games is named Barbara.

Barbara Mortimer, that's her name. Mike gulps awkwardly as he recalls the afternoon that Dustin brings over this book of name meanings and they spend hours looking up creepy names and finding out what their own names mean.

Mortimer, as far as Mike can recall, means death.

He decides that this information is probably best withheld from Nancy.

And then he sees himself get called on screen, Mike Wheeler said loud and clear for the whole square to hear. He sees his dazed face as he much too slowly realizes his fate and wishes he could've went back and changed his expression. He looked like a fool.

But then again, if he could've went back in time Mike probably would do something different, something related to making sure his name didn't get called in the first place.

The anthem plays and Barbara stands up abruptly.

"I'm going to bed." She says, looking weary.

"Sure. You should rest," Nancy tells her gently as she watches Barbara leave the room. Mike's right- this really is hard for Nancy.

"I guess we should go to bed too?" Mike suggests, more for Nancy's sake than himself. She looks like she's had enough for one day, and it's true.

"Yeah," Nancy says, and though she's standing right across from him

Mike feels like his sister has drifted hundreds of miles away.

The problem however, is that Mike can't get himself to sleep.

After parting ways with Nancy, one of the Capitol people leads him to his chambers, where he finds himself some comfortable sleepwear. He looks through all the drawers and realizes that all the clothes are for some reason in his size. It adds to the sinking feeling that the reaping was rigged, but Mike brushes it away. Whether the reaping had been rigged or not, he's stuck in this situation either way.

The blankets are warm and soft, even more so than those on his own bed. But Mike doesn't like it. He wants *his* home. *His* bed. He wants the sweet scent of the fabric softener his mother always uses dizzying him to sleep, he wants the frequent brush of wind through his window as it rustles against the trees in the woods, he wants the occasional hoot of an owl that gets quieter and quieter as he doses off.

Instead, he gets the repetitive *chug, chug, chug*, of the train as it makes its way down the tracks.

Mike wonders what his family and friends are like back at home. Was his mother able to cook dinner tonight? For Holly's sake she probably did, because no matter what happens their mother always makes sure their needs are taken care of.

Which is why she tends to leave Mike be when Nancy leaves to mentor their district's tributes in the Hunger Games. She knows he needs to be alone, but always places a small box of cereal at his door, leaving with a small knock in case he ever wants it. Mike's never taken a bite of that cereal, but his mother still continues to put it there year after year, anyway.

A sour lump forms in Mike's throat as he thinks about how she might never have to leave any boxes of cereal outside his door ever again.

He tries not to think about it anymore, and decides to think about Holly eating, how she's always a mess when she attempts to eat jam on her own. She gets it all over herself, sometimes in places no one would ever imagine a smashed berry would end up, like between her toes for instance.

He tries, really *really* hard not to think about how he might never see his baby sister eat like she's wearing her food again.

Mike forces himself not to think of his friends or he'll never fall asleep. Instead he throws off the covers and gets out of bed. He leaves his chambers and searches for Nancy's, which he finds easily enough since that was where she had brought them earlier.

"Nancy?" He whispers with his lips almost pressed against the door. He's not supposed to be wandering the train corridors at this hour. Mike hears some sniffing coming from Nancy's chambers and wonders if going over to her room was a mistake.

"Mike?" She whispers back hesitantly and then he hears her get up and pace towards the door. No turning back now.

"What are you doing here?" She asks as she opens the door for him, hurrying him inside and shutting the door behind them.

"Couldn't sleep." He says with a shrug, although he's also here because he wants to spend time with his sister- the one person out of all his loved ones he's still allowed to see, so could anyone really blame him for showing up at her door uninvited?

Nancy gives him a tired smile in response. "Me too." She says, and although it's rather dark he can make out how swollen from crying her eyes are. The very sight makes him want to cry too, but he doesn't.

"You want some hot chocolate?" And then Nancy's making her way over to her dresser and takes out a kettle along with two mugs and some packets of what is most definitely, hot chocolate.

His eyes widen and he makes a beeline for Nancy. "How did you get these?" He asks, childlike wonder and excitement lacing his words

once more.

Nancy smirks, proud to finally brag about just how sneaky she's been. "I've been on this train for years, remember? Eventually you swipe some stuff when people aren't looking."

Mike exhales in amusement. "And out of everything, you stole hot chocolate."

"Yeah, that's always a priority."

They share a laugh, and then Nancy pauses. "Although- I have stolen some other stuff too."

She gives him a tour of the things she's taken while they wait for their hot chocolate to cool and their marshmallows to melt (because of course Nancy stole marshmallows too).

Nancy's smart about what she's swiped from the Capitol's train. Always stuff that can last a long time, like crackers and sweets, and of course, that kettle of hers. Nancy's also stolen a toaster, even a few plates and some utensils.

"Whatever I can't keep I usually eat first." She tells him. "When I went on the Victory Tour I was on the train so much I just went nuts. Practically lived in here."

Their hot chocolate finally cools down from a boiling hot to a soothing warm that spreads throughout Mike's chest each time he takes a sip. They're both quietly burrowed under the covers on Nancy's bed, and Mike's nearly halfway through his hot chocolate before he speaks again.

"Nancy..."

"Hmm?" She looks up at him mid-sip.

"How did you win the games?" He asks.

She swallows and looks down, encircling her cup with her hands. "I didn't die."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked." Mike drinks more hot chocolate now. The games were probably something Nancy wanted to block out forever, and yet there he was asking her to relive every moment.

She shakes her head. "No- it's fine. I'll tell you. It's a good chance to give you tips anyway."

Mike smiles. "I remember some of what happened- but I think I was mostly just..." Crying. "I was a kid, and I guess I just forgot stuff."

Nancy smiles. "It's okay."

"What was... training like?" Mike asks, because it's probably the least triggering thing for Nancy to recall out of it all.

"There's a ton of stations. You learn survival skills, hand to hand combat, weapons training, traps and stuff with ropes. I think I saw the tributes from District 3 mess with electronics too. They built some kind of electric circuit and made the power go out in the Training Center for over an hour." Nancy stops herself to giggle at the memory, and it makes Mike smile.

"What did you do at training?"

Nancy stops to think. "A bunch of stuff? I tried random things like spear throwing, shooting arrows, and I went to the gun range too. The good thing was- the gun range is sort of enclosed so no one could see me shoot. And I turned out to be pretty good." Nancy smiles at this. "I was so good at shooting I used it during my private training, and then I used it in the arena."

"What score did you get?" Mike asks curiously.

"Oh, an eight. I didn't want to do too well- would've made me an automatic target. But I didn't want to do too bad either because I needed sponsors."

Mike nods as he considers this, greatly admiring his sister's skill. "Maybe I should try out the shooting range too. I know I can't throw- I can't even throw a rock straight."

Nancy nods. "It's probably in the genes. But you should learn some

survival skills too. I memorized all the edible plants and poisonous stuff and it saved my life in the arena more than any weapon ever could."

"I should check out the electronics too. That stuff seems cool."

Nancy smiles. "Yeah, you should."

Then all of a sudden they're both yawning- Mike can't tell if it was a coincidence, or one of them yawned first and the other followed suit.

"I guess it's time to sleep." Nancy smirks as she gently pinches Mike's cheek. He can't even bring himself to be annoyed by it.

"Yeah. I don't wanna go back to my room though."

Nancy ruffles his hair. "Who says you are? This bed is big enough for the both of us."

Mike smiles, and no matter how silly it feels, he rushes into Nancy's arms when she taps the spot next to her on the bed, and they fall asleep like a pair of the world's most clingiest siblings.

They have to cling, though. The days they have left to be clingy and sappy and loving might just be numbered.

Mike wakes up the next morning with a growling stomach, demanding to be fed. He sits up and from the brushing sounds coming from Nancy's bathroom, she's getting herself ready.

"See you at breakfast, Nancy!" He calls out as he heads out to get washed up himself, because his stomach really wasn't kidding about wanting food. She makes a sound of acknowledgement and he makes his way back to his own room.

No one notices Mike all the way through his journey back, all the Capitol people are rushing around the train, getting this and that ready. He takes his time, although there's a sense of urgency to his movements- because as stated many times, Mike's really *really* hungry.

He's not sure what brought on this hunger. Maybe whatever sadness

he had curbing his appetite was gone, or his stomach just simply couldn't care less about his moping any more.

He's the first one down for breakfast, eating this and that, even going so far as to request waffles that he wolfs down heartily.

He's so busy eating Mike's not even sure he saw Nancy at breakfast. Or anyone else, for that matter.

As promised, the train carefully comes to a halt at the Capitol's train station just a few minutes before eleven. After that, everything's a blur- Mike's rushed off to his stylist and prep team.

He spends only five minutes in the Remake Center as his prep team takes him in almost pitifully.

"There's nothing to remake. He's a boy. There's nothing we need to get rid of." One of them remarks almost sadly, but Mike's glad in a way that there's nothing about him they need to 'get rid of', since that sounds painful. Although he's painfully reminded again that he's much too young for the games.

His stylist, is a lazy drunk who tosses his costume at him with simple instructions to put it on before he leaves.

"It looks *awful*." Their escort remarks as Mike and Barbara stand side by side on the chariot before the opening ceremony starts.

Mike can't help but agree. He's dressed head to toe in what appears to be black spandex. What's he supposed to be, *literal* coal?

"I mean- you two just look like strokes of black! Side by side, it's as if you're forming the number eleven."

Mike purses his lip and quietly sighs to himself. He should start keeping score for how many times he gets reminded of her. He's starting to truly believe that the universe just hates him. Mike simply being a tribute in the games proves that fact.

"That's because the outfits aren't complete yet," Mike recognizes Nancy's stylist, who is unsurprisingly now Barbara's stylist too. "Barbara, you forgot your skirt."

Barbara has barely any reaction to this, only reaching out to take the skirt and pull it on. It's black with ruffles, which makes her luckier than Mike, who's still just a small boy in ugly spandex.

"It still looks ghastly." Their escort complains."

"Not. Done. Yet." Nancy, or to be more accurate Barbara's stylist whips something out from her pocket. It's some sort of tiny remote with only one button, but when she presses it the effect is startlingly huge.

Slowly, colors of red and amber glow on Mike, and it dawns on him that he's not just a piece of coal- he's a piece of burning coal.

It still feels a little stupid, but Mike finds his costume a lot cooler right now, because the colors on his spandex suit move like how heat would travel around a real piece of coal, like in a campfire.

Opening ceremony comes and goes very quickly, he doesn't make much of an effort to wave because he recalls that Nancy didn't do that either and unlike some districts that try to play the united front card, he and Barbara stand as far apart as can be.

"Tomorrow's the first training session." Their escort remarks during dinner that night. They're eating at the top floor of the Training Center, and their living quarters are gorgeous and simply breathtaking. Not that Mike really cares of course. He'd rather live than see the Capitol's riches for merely a few short days. "Any advice, mentor?"

Nancy stops eating to look up at himself and Barbara.

"Learn survival skills on the first day. What to eat and what not to eat. How to find clean water, and all that. Try not to bring too much attention to yourselves. If you have a special skill you're good at, keep it a secret. Try out something new. Take the quiz on poisonous plants and fruits every day so you remember it all. Most of the time in the arena, you're not there to kill, you're there to keep yourself alive." She clears her throat. "I think that's all I can think of right now. You can... both ask me any questions whenever you need to. My room's always open."

Mike takes Nancy up on that offer, and learns more about what she did in the arena. They watch the tape of the 80th Hunger Games as Nancy provides a running commentary.

Nancy kills a total of five people whilst in the arena. She had grabbed what was nearest to her metal plate after stepping off when the game started and ran away immediately, not wanting to risk falling victim to the bloodbath.

"Which is what you should do too." She interjects to remind Mike.

"Of course." He replies. "I'm not going to fight anyone twice my size for weapons I won't even be able to use."

"True." Nancy says, and Mike feels sorry because they're both reminded of how unequipped Mike is to fight in these games.

Nancy doesn't actually do much for most of the games, and thus her screen time ends up being rather minimal. As she said before, she was not there to kill, but rather to survive. And survive she did. Mike watched as Nancy set traps, hunt for animals, and gather nuts and berries for herself. There's even footage of her striking a hole in this rocky structure with another rock and a stream of water flows out.

"How did you do that?!" He exclaims, as a younger triumphant Nancy gulps water happily on screen.

"The right weapon, the right angle, and the right amount of force." She says, just as proud as she was back then.

"Or- you're *insanely* strong. I still remember how you broke that lock when we were trying to find Will in the Upside Down at school. You're so cool."

They hadn't talked about that week after it ended- how Barbara was gone and Eleven was gone too.

"Thanks." Nancy says, actually sounding grateful, as they continue to watch the games.

The first person Nancy kills dies because she gets a gun as a gift from her sponsors sent by her mentor- her first weapon in the games. Someone

chances upon Nancy's hideout two hours after that, and without thinking Nancy shoots. She looks affected and shocked by her actions as the girl drops dead on the floor with the sound of a cannon going off. It's a Career tribute from District 1, according to the screen shown by the Capitol flashing the dead tributes.

Nancy looks affected right now as she watches this, and Mike feels bad again for making her relive one of the worst experiences she's ever been through. Or more accurately, *the* worst experience she'd ever been through.

He holds her hand, more for his sake than hers, honestly, out of the guilt in his heart for the bad memories he's making her re-expose herself to.

"It's okay." Nancy assures him, but neither of them remove their hands, and she even squeezes tighter when she's shown killing again.

Someone makes an attack on her, shooting an arrow that fails to pierce her. In some sort of momentary rage, Nancy turns around and shoots, perfectly hitting the tribute who attacked her with a lethal shot. The cannon sounds immediately and Nancy just runs off.

Could that be him, too? Killing the other tributes and then feeling instantly bad for it? Mike doesn't want to think about this. He doesn't want to kill anyone, or hurt anyone. He's twelve. He shouldn't have to need to do this. But this is the Capitol. And these are their Hunger Games. And this is, sadly, his unlucky fate.

Because the Capitol wasn't liking how easy having a gun made things for Nancy, they send some wild mutated animal after her which she only manages to take out by using all her bullets.

This leaves her with no choice but to have to start stealing weapons and supplies. Nancy goes back to the mini waterfall she had created and chooses the heaviest rock she can find, for some reason. But at the same time small enough. She stuffs the rock in her backpack and climbs up a tall tree.

"One more thing you should learn at the arena-" Nancy quips. "Climbing. There's always something to climb in every arena. Most of

the time, anyway."

Mike nods, too engrossed in watching what his sister's about to do.

Once she climbs high enough, she takes out her rock and waits, poised and ready to attack. A particularly arrogant looking guy walks right under Nancy's tree, and Mike can see Nancy smile on the screen as she sends the rock hurtling straight for the boy's head with as much force as she can muster.

"He's someone I didn't feel bad for hurting." Nancy explains, in case Mike thinks she's some sort of killing machine now. "He harassed so many of us during training, like he wasn't there to fight but to flirt. I even heard that he did some... bad things to the female tribute from his district."

Mike winces at the thought, and then laughs at what happens next.

Nancy climbs down the tree at lightning speed, grabbing the tribute's knife and taking advantage of his injured state to stab him. The cannon goes off and Nancy looks pleased with herself.

"He deserved that." He says.

Nancy takes all the dead tribute's things and runs off to let the Capitol collect his body. She finds a load of useful things in the bag besides the knife that she cleans at her water stream.

She looks incredibly happy and Mike feels that same happiness watching her inch closer and closer to winning.

There's another huge fight that happens when an announcement is made that there's to be a supply of drinking water at the Cornucopia. Nancy doesn't go, of course, but there are other tributes who are slowly dying from dehydration because they lacked Nancy's strength and resourcefulness to crack open a huge rock for water.

Except the next day, the Capitol drains Nancy's rock dry, and no matter how many new holes she makes, she can't find any water.

So she turns up one day late for the water party, and spies on the survivors. Besides herself, there are still two more tributes. Both males

from Districts 1 and 2. Which is no surprise, really. They had agreed to stick it out till the end together, even teaming up to take out the female tributes from their own districts together one at a time.

As Nancy watches them, the two tributes are arguing over the number of tributes left, having not properly kept track.

"Please tell me you let them kill each other." Mike comments which makes Nancy laugh. He knows she doesn't do this based on what he remembers- Nancy fights, actually fights her way to victory.

"I probably should have. That would've been easier."

Deciding it was time to end their argument, Nancy looks through her backpack for suitable weapons. She has a long knife and a short knife, an unloaded gun, and some ropes. She picks up the small knife and looks at it purposefully. And then in one swift motion, she turns around and throws it, hard.

It stabs the guy from District 2 and he starts bleeding out.

"Who's there!" The District 1 guy yells in a mix of shock and anger.

Nancy doesn't know whether to respond when he spots her. Annoyingly, he smiles.

"Looks like I'm coming home."

Nancy is filled with anger on screen, and who could blame her? Mike hates the guy wholeheartedly and was glad to know his sister defeated him.

"Okay, now I'm glad you didn't let those two kill each other. He deserved to have his mouth ripped out for looking down on you like that. I mean- you just killed the other dude by throwing a knife at him!"

Nancy groans indignantly at her past. "I know, right?"

Nancy greets the guy from District 1 with a hard punch, not even using the knife, and he's knocked back a couple of inches reeling from the pain. He starts bleeding a little.

"Sweet right hook you got there." He says.

"Still sure you're going home now?"

Mike starts clapping immediately at what Nancy's past self said, and she has to settle him down in order to avoid waking the others.

"That line was awesome!" He cheers and nearly jumps on the bed before settling down to continue watching.

Nancy raises her knife, but gets knocked down by the tribute. He laughs cockily as he steps over to her, and just as he's about to pick her up, Nancy stabs him.

Through his crotch.

Mike's whooping and nearly yelling again when he sees this, and Nancy's actually laughing at her brother's ridiculousness.

The District 1 tribute gives a strangled cry before he's brought down on his knees. Nancy pulls out her knife which makes him scream in agony, before she stabs him through the chest. Then she goes off to make sure the guy from District 2 is dead too because she either didn't hear a cannon or was too busy fighting.

Nancy smiles when she hears the announcement, and Mike smiles too as he watches this.

"Ladies and Gentlemen- I present to you your winner of the 80th Hunger Games: Nancy Wheeler from District 12!"

Mike thinks about how Nancy hadn't cheered when she won but rather smiled contentedly as tears streamed down her face in relief.

He hopes that'll be him too.

Mike spends his first day in training doing exactly what Nancy told

him to, and what he said he wanted to do. Most of it, anyway.

He learns about all the poisonous and edible plants, every possible part of nature that he needs to be wary of. He gets full marks for the quiz and moves on to the shooting range.

The recoil from the gun makes Mike fall over on his first try, but he's determined to succeed. He ends up being rather decent at shooting by the end of the day.

The next day, is when he gets adventurous. He tries to pick up a spear, but he's too weak to even hold it right. He ignores the pitiful stares thrown his way as he puts the spear back down and tries out other stations. He learns how to set traps, how to use ropes and tie nooses which he finds is a frightening way to die and decides he probably doesn't want to use that.

And then he goes over to what appears to be the electronics station and that's when the magic happens.

The station expert seems to be fond of Mike, who picks up stuff fast and figures out how to make some sort of electric trap on his own.

"Keep this up, and you'll have a bigger chance of surviving in that arena," he tells Mike.

"But would the arena have... wires? Why does this station even exist?"

The station expert chuckles. "You never know. And there are always sponsors."

That bit actually gives Mike quite a bit of hope. And then the station expert teaches Mike how to make this super cool gun that shoots this electric trap of sorts. If aimed properly, shooting someone could electrocute them.

"I think... this is what I'm going to use for my private training session." He tells the station expert, who's very pleased about this.

On the third day, Mike takes the survival skills quiz one last time and gets a perfect score again, which is a relief. He practices at the

shooting range again which is good firstly because of the privacy it brings, as Nancy said. Secondly, he's the second last tribute in line for the private training session with the Gamemakers and he can't just sit around doing nothing.

When it's finally his turn, Mike walks into the gymnasium and heads straight for what he needs. He assembles the electric gun carefully, since there's no time limit, and thinks about where he should shoot to look most impressive. He considers the targets such as the bull's-eyes and human silhouettes, and decides to take a quick look at the Gamemakers to see if they're watching.

Which is when his heart stops. Because Mike sees him. The Bad Man. The one who held Eleven captive, the one who she hauntingly addressed as 'Papa'. What the hell was that *bastard* doing here?

His anger and shock is met by a small smile the Bad Man gives him. That does it. He knows where to shoot now. Bull's-eyes and human silhouettes just don't make the cut. Mike raises his hand and shoots straight for him. The Bad Man.

The Gamemakers all shriek as his electric trap hits the glass wall separating them from the gymnasium, shattering it. Mike was not aware of that glass wall, but he's almost grateful for it, because he would've gotten into trouble had he killed the Bad Man, who is apparently a Gamemaster now.

Or was this just a side gig for him? With his main job being whatever evil stuff he did in his stupid lab.

Mike's at a loss of what to do and just walks out of the room quietly.

He gets an 11. He wonders if the Bad Man did it on purpose, knew what it would do to Mike. He wonders if it's a warning.

"You got an 11?!" Nancy takes a while to process this, and she's mildly horrified when Mike tells her everything that happens.

"I'm going to be an instant target now, aren't I?"

"You'll be hard to target if they can't find you. Remember to run, Mike. This is good, I swear. I can get you more sponsors now."

Mike doesn't know if he can run from the other tributes, but he knows for sure that if the Bad Man wants him dead, he'll be able to kill him just fine in the arena. Wouldn't even have to lift more than a finger.

About a day after receiving their scores is when the tribute interviews take place. Nancy tells him to play up being an innocent yet determined child as his approach in the interview. He wears a suit, but the look they go for is young and naive, so the suit's two sizes too big for him.

The crowd falls silent when he steps on stage. He purposely climbs up the chair in a somewhat crawling position to take his seat, making him look even smaller and he hears some people make choked up noises.

The interviewer is a kind and funny gentleman, who's been helpful to all the tributes tonight.

"Mike Wheeler- from District 12! Nice to meet you, young man. How are you finding the Capitol so far?"

"It's... too big." He says, and then the crowd laughs because hahaha, he's small.

"I agree." The interviewer says in response. "Your sister, Nancy- she's District 12's only living victor now. How did she feel about you being reaped for the games?"

"I'll tell you what I told her- District 12 won't have just one victor anymore."

The crowd *oohs* and *ahs* at that, and soon he's receiving a round of applause.

"Has your sister been affected as a mentor because her brother is one of the tributes? Has it compromised how she trains... Barbara?"

Mike shakes his head immediately. No way he lets anyone sully her name. "No. She gives us the same advice. She doesn't withhold anything or give me special tips."

"Well it seems she doesn't need to. That 11- the highest score out of all the tributes! And by the youngest tribute too!"

Mike smiles. "I think they must've made some sort of mistake. But I'm glad they think so highly of me."

Somehow weirdly, the interviewer turns the topic into his relationships at home.

"Mike. I'm sure everyone's hearts tightened seeing your friends cry for you during the reaping. Were there any... *girls* crying for you too?" He asks with a wink.

"Huh?" Mike says, completely caught off guard. The audience bursts into laughter and the interviewer gushes about how innocent he is.

"Mike- what I mean to say is, is there a lady back home? Someone special?"

"There was-" Mike says too quickly, and stops himself before his stupid fat mouth says anything else.

The audience gasps and goes crazy and so does the interviewer.

"My oh my! I was merely joking but- you have to tell us more."

"There's no one." He says quickly, but it doesn't work because he's blushing apparently, which is pointed out to him.

"Come on! Spill the beans! Would you like to make a public confession to her on camera?"

Mike clears his throat. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because... she's not there to listen to it."

A hush falls over the audience at the implication Mike makes, and then the buzzer goes off. The audience complains and wants to listen to more, but Mike gets up and walks off stage.

And maybe, just maybe, there's a tear in his eye because he's so worried that what he implied to the audience might not be a lie after all.

4. The Games

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took so long!! I really hope you guys enjoy this... hecka long chapter I hope you guys like this!! Any comments would really be appreciated and motivating and please leave kudos if you can!!!

"You were talking about... her, weren't you?" Nancy asks him the moment they're back at their floor of the Training Centre. "Eleven?"

Mike can only nod silently in response as Nancy offers him what he supposes is a pitying look. He's had enough of those though, so he turns away.

"Look. Maybe some people think she's... gone. Maybe even you. But I think she'll come back, Mike. She'll come back for you. Which is why you need to be here to see her when she does."

When Mike still continues to maintain his stoical expression, Nancy grabs him by the shoulders and forces him to look at her.

"I made you a promise, remember? I'm going to get you out of that arena. I'm going to be *fighting* until they announce you as the winner of the 83rd Hunger Games. But I can't do that if you don't fight along with me. If wanting to survive isn't enough to make you fight- think of her. Think of Mom, Dad. Think of Holly. All your friends."

"And *you*." Mike continues, because despite the dread surrounding his possibly imminent death given the diminishing time left until the start of the games, he loves his sister and he has to assure her that she is something worth staying alive for. Assure her that she is someone worth fighting for.

Because this could very well be the last time she hears this from him.

It's all worth it though, because the brief respite displayed on her face in the form of a tired smile lets Mike know that he's managed to cheer her up just a little.

"And me." She repeats, as if assuring herself. "Just think- we could be coming back here together. Imagine all the crazy things we could get up to on the train. We'd get double the money from the Capitol. Maybe they'll even let us have an extra house. And we'd come here for really good food every year after. It'll be like a holiday."

Nancy's words feel forced, and Mike knows that they are indeed forced because he hates the sound of all those things. He hates what Nancy has to do each and every year and he knows she does too. Having to come back to the Capitol. Having to mentor new tributes. Watch them die despite his best efforts. See that gloom and weariness that burdens Nancy's face all that more with each passing year appear on his face too.

But at least- Nancy won't be alone in this anymore, if he wins. She won't have to suffer on her own, no longer will his sister have to deal with all the sadness by herself. It must've been so lonely.

"That does sound nice. Both of us being victors." Mike thinks about how he'll no longer go without dinner when Nancy leaves to mentor each year's tributes. Because he'll be going along with her every step of the way.

"I may not be in that arena with you, Mike. But you won't be alone. I'll spend my every waking moment doing all that it takes. I'll do whatever it takes to get you out of there."

Mike has to admit to being a little frightened by his sister's declaration, because she seems all too determined to see it through.

Nancy being willing to do anything to make sure he escapes the arena alive just makes him worry about exactly what she'll do to make that happen.

Nancy forces Mike to go to bed early, which he obeys without protest. A Capitol attendant slips him this warm cup of milk that she

promises will soothe him to sleep. He's not eight years old anymore though, so Mike's a little skeptical about its effects.

He ends up knocking right out mere minutes after draining the sweet milk and comes to in the morning after a dreamless sleep. That Capitol attendant had most definitely slipped Mike more than just a little milk, but he's grateful for it because a dreamless sleep means no nightmares and a well-rested alertness which could prove useful in the arena for the days to come.

There's no time for anything, not even a light breakfast. Mike chews on some dry toast leftover from what that Capitol attendant had apparently brought along with the milk anyway and gives Nancy one last hug before he's forced to leave with his stylist, who's sobered up for once and looks even worse off than when he had been drunk.

"I love you." Nancy whispers to Mike as they embrace each other tightly, unwilling to let go.

"I love you too." He says without a moment's hesitation.

As they pull away and share one final look of farewell, Mike and Nancy both worry that that may have just been their last chance to tell each other those words.

"Come along now." Mike's stylist finally says to hurry things along. Barbara and her stylist had left long ago. "We don't have all day."

"Sorry. I'm not in a rush to get murdered." Mike mutters under his breath to his stylist, who seems amused if anything.

The next few hours pass by in various mixes of fast blurs and terrifying eternities.

The walk up to the roof feels like forever despite the single flight of stairs Mike climbs to reach it. It's extremely awkward and Mike doesn't think anything could worsen the complete lack of camaraderie between him and his stylist, but apparently he hadn't considered the ramifications of small talk.

"You feeling okay, kid?" He asks right as they reach the roof. Mike can tell he's trying... to be nice? Helpful? He's trying to be something.

If Mike were in a better place in his life and cared more about his stylist, he'd probably have responded more kindly. He couldn't be bothered less by whatever last minute sentiments his finally sober stylist wants to share however, and it brings out a rather bitter side of him he never knew he even had.

"Oh I'm feeling *great*." He says, every word dripping with sarcasm. "Can't wait to fight others to the death. *So* excited for it."

His stylist withholds a sigh and waiting for the hovercraft to appear takes forever. A ladder finally drops down and Mike's momentarily immobilized when he climbs it. The ladder brings him up to the hovercraft and someone explains to him that they're about to insert his tracker. He winces through the pain of getting the device injected into his arm, which is worrying; because if he can't even handle being pricked, how's he to handle, let's say- getting *stabbed*?

Mike and his stylist are led to a room where a generous spread of breakfast is laid out. Mike is so famished, he nearly finishes everything on the table. Maybe it has something to do with the "milk" that Capitol attendant gave him the night before. In almost a flash, Mike polishes off his breakfast and his stomach is slightly sad to see the food disappear so fast, too fast.

He takes a short nap after eating, presumably exhausted from gorging himself. Mike knows he won't afford such a luxury in the arena. This thought saddens him enough to stare blankly out of the windows of the hovercraft, watching the clouds go by because they're so high up he can't see the ground.

There's a clock in the room, which lets Mike know that the hovercraft takes a few hours to reach the arena. Time goes by much too quickly though, and it feels like it's way too soon when the windows black out as they approach the arena. Mike knows that the hovercraft took a much longer time than previous years to get to the arena. He knows this from hearing about Nancy's experience and also from the way his stylist starts pacing around the room impatiently after the first hour in the hovercraft goes by. The pacing doesn't bother Mike though, because it's better than small talk. And thankfully, his stylist never makes another attempt to engage in conversation with him whilst in the hovercraft.

Wherever the arena is, it's very far away from the Capitol. What Mike can't figure out is why. The Capitol tends to build arenas in areas close by to facilitate easier construction. What possessed them to set up shop so far away from home is very confusing.

But at the same time, it doesn't matter. All Mike has to worry about is staying alive.

When the hovercraft lands, Mike's taken underground into the catacombs under the arena and led to his launch room. He's helped into the outfit by his stylist. It's nothing much, really. Mike gets put into a dry-fit t-shirt and track pants. He shrugs on this windbreaker which makes Mike worry about cold nights. It's funny because the worst of his worries should be getting murdered, not getting taken out by natural elements. However if this windbreaker doesn't do its job, dying from hypothermia seems like a real possibility.

"Good... good luck out there kid." His stylist remarks with a small pat on Mike's shoulder, before letting Mike step onto the circular metal plate. Mike nods, choosing to ignore his stylist as this glass cylinder begins to lower around him. Mike feels himself rise and slowly get engulfed by the darkness. The darkness feels like yet another eternity Mike doesn't want to end; he embraces these last few moments of solitude before he's lifted up into the open air and hit by the glare of sunlight.

The announcer's blaring voice jolts him as he floods the arena with his next words.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Eighty-Third Hunger Games begin!"

The first thing Mike sees once his eyes adjust back to the light is the Cornucopia. It's as golden as ever, gigantic and shaped like a cone with a curved tail. Other than the Cornucopia, everything around Mike looks alien- except not quite.

What Mike means is that he's never seen any arena like this one he stands in before- first of all, it seems... way too urban. Although Mike sees a vast expanse of tall trees filling up a mysterious woods, he also sees roads. The closest one being right behind this buff-looking Career tribute. In the distance- Mike spots a house too? All the games that Mike remembers watching displayed a complete lack of... civilization. Sure, this arena's not devoid of nature, not by a long shot, but it's not *dominated* by nature. It's lacking this primitive feel often present in other arenas. Perhaps the Gamemakers were trying something new.

And that's what made the arena feel so alien. What made the arena feel *not* so alien at the same time though- was that it felt like home.

Not *home* home. Mike was pretty sure he had not been in any part of District 12 that looked like this arena. But there was a certain familiarity to the trees he saw swaying behind him; a certain familiarity to the roads winding down the slopes. A certain familiarity even to the very ground he stood on.

But it was probably a coincidence. Maybe District 12 wasn't so unique after all; maybe his side of District 12 wasn't anything special and all the other districts looked just like it, excluding the Capitol, which held riches upon riches and was too posh for nature, probably.

Not only does the arena look like it's a place in his home, District 12, it's also incredibly huge and seemingly vast and unending. Mike wonders what he'll find if he ventures deep enough into the woods. Will he find a river? A cave? A mountain? He looks down the road and wonders whether it will lead him to the house. Would he be able to enter the house? What was in that house anyway? Were there more houses?

Mike takes a deep breath. He's on the verge of freaking out. The sixty seconds are ticking by literally through the announcer's countdown. He analyzes the bounty at the Cornucopia next. He sees a lot of supplies, weapons, food, backpacks. For the first time Mike knows of, he sees modes of transport too. It's crazy, but he actually spots a few bicycles. Like the kinds he would ride with his friends. It brings up memories- good, perfect memories that Mike never wants to part with. It scares Mike how he might have to take those memories to his

grave.

Bicycles aren't the only vehicles he sees at the Cornucopia. For some weird reason, there's some sort of golf buggy. He sees scooters too, and funnily enough, even a few pairs of roller blades. He nearly laughs at the image of tributes skating down the streets of the arena, hunting each other with knives and spears and the like.

It's a pity everything is only at the Cornucopia. Like, literally. All supplies are concentrated on or inside the Cornucopia, with nothing strewn around it. Mike feels screwed. He knows that if he wants anything, he's going to have to get to the Cornucopia and fight over it with the other tributes. Which is a guaranteed way to get himself killed.

It dawns on him that the only way to escape is to run away and leave empty-handed. Mike's heart clenches at having to do that though. He sees the multitude of supplies and those bikes and it hurts having to abandon them.

Ten seconds before they're allowed to step off their metal plates, Mike hears a huge bag of what he supposes is good supplies fall off the Cornucopia and land into the basket of one of the bikes. It gets the attention of many tributes; Mike is extremely intrigued for one.

Slowly, the impossible happens. The bicycle begins to roll itself down to where Mike is standing. His heart pounds as he thinks about how incredibly lucky he is, and also how crazy this all is.

The bike stops right next to Mike- and it's a goddamn miracle he supposes. His ride out of here and into a more hidden part of the arena is now secure. He doesn't have to take part in and fall victim to the blood bath.

Mike's ears pick up the last five seconds of the countdown.

Five. Mike's hand reaches out to grab the bike in case it falls over. *Four.* The bike starts turning on the spot, causing Mike to let go in shock. When it stops turning Mike realizes the bike's pointing him in the direction of the best place to escape to- the woods. *Three.* Mike takes a deep breath and gets ready for his swift escape. *Two.* He

realizes practically everyone is staring at him and the bike, and he knows how weird this is. Everyone must be freaking out because they think Mike knows witchcraft or has powers or both. Mike is freaking out about the strangeness of this situation too, but he can definitely afford to think about this later. *One.* Mike realizes he's probably going to be heavily targeted by everyone the moment the sixty seconds are up, and that makes it all the more important that he escapes quickly.

Zero. Mike jumps onto the bike and coasts down into the woods as fast as he can, not allowing fear the time to slow his resolve, to seep into his bones and cause him to recoil in terror.

His bravery isn't for nothing- Mike finds that a path in the ground of the woods has been smoothened down and is suited for his bicycle to go speeding down the slope without slowing down or tripping.

Which Mike finds out soon enough is a huge problem.

He's going *too fast*. The woods are going to end eventually- this slope can't last forever, can it? Mike's heart begins to pound against his chest the faster he speeds down the steep slope. When he stops- and he definitely will stop at some point, Mike's going to get seriously injured.

Worry begins to flood his head with horrifying theories. What if he cycles off a cliff? What if waiting at the bottom of the slope is a sword that impales Mike on impact? Was this the Gamemakers' plan all along for him?

Mike recalls his reckless shooting at the Bad Man. Perhaps this was his revenge, and the Gamemakers had sent the bike to him so he could send himself barreling towards his own death. Maybe angrily trying to electrocute the Bad Man had guaranteed his demise.

Still worth it though.

And then Mike sees it. The end of the slope. There's no cliff, no sword, thankfully. But it looks like a sharp end to the slope from where he is, and Mike knows that he's going to suffer a very bad fall. And it's going to hurt more than he can handle.

Mike desperately presses hard on the brakes, gripping them tightly in hopes of slowing down the bike and reducing the impact of his fall.

But then the breaks aren't working. And right at the end of the slope Mike now spots a huge rock in his path that he was too high up to see before. It's too late to move out of the way because he's going so fast. Mike closes his eyes and feels himself tremble in dread.

This is it, he thinks.

Except he waits for a crash that never happens. All of a sudden, Mike comes to a halt.

Or to be more accurate, the bicycle comes to a halt. The only problem is- his bike comes to a halt ten feet before the end of the slope. Which means Mike is flung from his bike and headed straight for the huge rock. He starts cursing his luck just as he stops moving. In *mid-air*.

A strange sense of *déjà vu* overcomes Mike as he's lowered back down to his bike, causing him to fall onto his seat. Hard. It hurts way too much but he supposes it's better than his skull getting cracked open.

Slowly, the bike begins to roll down to the ground and Mike topples over with it, unhurt for the most part (completely unhurt if you don't count his crotch), and Mike can't believe his luck.

He also can't believe this whole situation in general, but he figures it's not her. Because it *can't* be her. In what universe would he be lucky enough for it to be her? Mike gets up and walks his bike away from the slope to find some place private- after all, someone could be chasing after him right this second and by staying in the exact same place he landed up in after escaping through this route he took, he's basically giving himself up to anyone that might want to kill him for his supplies and bike.

Mike figures it's the Gamemakers who orchestrated his little brush with death. Perhaps it was to make him a target. Or perhaps it was just for the entertainment of it all. He was picked to have this near-death experience because he was the youngest, probably. And his

close-call with death would elicit the most excitement and fear amongst the audience.

Mike supposes that's a good thing in a way. He hopes he has a ton of sponsors now, and that they're all going to Nancy and flinging their money at her to save him, and that Nancy will send something soon.

Just then, Mike comes across the most perfect cave. He hesitantly ventures inside, and finds a mostly dark but peaceful place. It's snug, but large enough for him to place his bike and possibly set up a bed. Mike also manages to find this huge stone structure that hides the entrance of the cave properly enough to conceal Mike as well as crawl in and out of the cave as and when he needs to.

The cave is dry and warm and Mike knows it's the perfect place to hide out in case it gets cold. It's the perfect place to hide from any carnivorous animals that might pace around quietly at night too, looking for prey.

Mike parks his bike at a corner of his cave, and decides to examine the contents of the huge backpack he had luckily gotten along with the bike. He thanks whichever Gamemaker made the call to drop that in the basket of the bicycle they sent his way. Or it might have been a complete accident too, who knew?

The first thing Mike finds in the backpack is a huge sleeping bag. Mike grins happily as he discovers this treasure, and spreads out the sleeping bag immediately. He tries it out- it's soft and comfy and warm. It's also big enough to fit two people, but Mike's not complaining, although he foresees some lonely nights.

And then Mike finds food. There are some strips of beef jerky, a box of crackers, and even a few packs of dried fruit. Mike's very pleased to see all of this. The food can keep him going for days if he rations it right.

The next thing Mike finds is a small knife, a box of matches, and a dart gun. Mike loves the dart gun most of all. He recognizes this gun from a previous game. It's used for shooting animals- but if you dip the darts in the right poison it kills humans too. He supposes the matches are handy in case it gets especially cold and he needs to start

a fire to stay warm. Or he could use the fire to cook if he runs out of food and has to hunt. And the knife can be used for so many things. Mike can't believe his luck.

Next, Mike discovers a huge coil of wire. He smirks as he sees this. A few more essential items and he can make that gun he used for his private session with the Gamemasters. Mike wishes there was some way to communicate what he needed with Nancy.

Which there is, actually. He stops looking through his bag and instead looks up, hoping Nancy's watching him now. He blatantly lists out everything he needs for the gun to his sister. Because after all, none of the other tributes can hear him.

Lastly, Mike finds a huge empty water bottle and a tiny vial of iodine. Mike sighs as he takes in the empty bottle, feeling his throat dry up all that more at knowing he's going to have to find water on his own.

Suddenly, Mike hears the offending sound of a cannon signaling the end of the bloodbath. He supposes each cannon is meant to be music to the surviving tributes' ears, but Mike just feels gloomier. He counts the number of cannons though, because being informed can't hurt, especially given the game he's playing.

Mike counts a total of eleven cannons. One for each tribute. He sighs at the number reference and hates the universe for being so annoying again.

He decides it's the best time to set out in search of water. With the bloodbath coming to a close, surviving tributes would be using this time to recuperate from whatever wounds suffered, catalogue any weapons or supplies won. Mike wonders who managed to get hold of the buggy. It's probably the Career alliance though, so he tries not to dwell on it and starts deciding what he should bring along for his water search.

Mike packs a minimal supply of food, and takes along both his knife and dart gun, putting it all into his backpack. Who knows what he might come across? He could find a poisonous substance to make his gun lethal, wood to start a fire with, or even some fresh berries. Mike also brings along his water bottle and the small vial of iodine since

collecting clean drinking water is pretty much the entire reason he's leaving this safe, secluded place at all.

Finally, Mike leaves the cave. He had debated taking his bike along with him for faster travel, but it could attract too much attention and put him in danger. And so he walks, hoping no one finds his cave and that he makes it back safe.

Mike treks along the stony structure his cave originated from, in hopes of keeping his sense of direction. Should he need to return, he could just follow the rocky walls.

However, his search for water turns out a failure, at first. Mike doesn't so much as locate a pond, and he doesn't come across any plants more interesting than grass or weeds. Eventually, Mike decides to venture further. He could always find his way back to the cave eventually- but without water, he dies. And his parched throat is unwilling to compromise on the matter.

Miles of walking later, Mike spots a bird sipping on a puddle of water. It gives him hope that he's finally found the right way. He picks up his pace, walking faster and faster, hoping he comes across a stream or something.

It's a mistake. Mike catches the attention of two tributes, and suddenly he's making eye contact with two boys who are each easily twice his height. Mike gulps. This is bad.

"Look, I don't want any trouble-" Mike begins to negotiate as he raises both his hands.

But then one of the tributes starts eyeing his backpack and has a certain moment of realization. His eyes widen and he quickly whispers to the tribute next to him.

That's how Mike knows these two boys are not going to let him live. On instinct, he takes off running in the opposite direction, and groans

inwardly when he hears them break into a chase after him.

They're fast and have larger strides, but Mike had a decent head start and is more desperate; plus past experiences of running away from bullies like Troy have taught him efficient ways of moving through the woods. Or at least, more efficient ways than how the two tributes are moving. Sure, Mike's not the fastest runner in his class, but he knows it's the only way to save his life right now, so he finds the energy and drive within himself to push forward.

Mike's lucky his pursuers don't seem to have any weapons on them. And judging by how they're chasing after him instead of attacking on the spot, Mike knows they're probably two of the tributes that chose to run instead of fight for supplies at the Cornucopia.

It doesn't matter though. Mike knows that the moment they catch up to him, either one of them would be capable of snapping his neck in a second. Sure, they're not Career tributes, but they're way bigger and stronger than Mike all the same.

Mike curses how he didn't find any poison in the arena in time. If he had, he'd just whip out his gun and be done with the two tributes. Mike takes a sudden detour out of the woods in hopes of losing the two tributes and he can't tell if it's the right move or a huge mistake. Because ten feet ahead of where Mike is heading towards is the edge of a cliff.

Beneath the cliff Mike sees tranquil and still water- so that's where it was. Mike looks around him, and finds himself at a bit of a dead end. He can't turn around now, he'll basically be running into the arms of death.

As the two laughing tributes begin to catch up to him, Mike quickly weighs his options.

He could stay put. And in ten seconds he would get caught. Even if the boys chose not to take his life there and then, they would do it eventually, and Mike would have no way to overpower them.

Or... he could jump. Mike feels apprehension at this prospect, but really- isn't it his best choice? The water looks deep; maybe it can

cushion the impact of his fall so much so that he doesn't die. And then he'd be able to escape, by swimming away from the two tributes.

Mike's scared, but no amount of fear at having to jump can trump his present fear of getting killed by those two tributes. He knows jumping is risky, oh so *very* risky, but it's his best shot.

And... even if he doesn't survive the jump, dying this way feels safer and less gruesome than whatever death the two tributes had in store for him. His friends and family will just see a still body lying in water rather than his cold, dead eyes staring into nothingness. The life in him snapped out through his neck.

As the footsteps and menacing sounds from his pursuers get louder by the second, Mike knows his time is up and he has to take action. He takes a deep breath and counts to five- he feels the two boys catch all the way up to only ten feet behind him before he steps off the edge of the cliff, plunging headfirst towards the water.

Mike's screaming and the wind slicing against his face as he spirals down towards the water chills him to the bone. He's absolutely terrified and if he weren't trying so hard to breathe he'd notice how his heart's about to beat right out of his chest.

And then all of a sudden, he stops. He's suspended in mid-air again, which is very reassuring but also very confusing. Mike's five feet away from the surface of the water before he stops falling and is just... *floating*. He stays that way for about a second or two before he's released back into the water.

Mike is submerged deep enough to realize that he totally misjudged the depth of this water. It... barely covers Mike's height. He could stand up with his feet on the ground and the water would barely reach his nose.

Mike could've died.

Which is something he knew *before* jumping off the cliff, but the knowledge that the probability of his death had been higher than expected is just scary to Mike.

As Mike swims away, desperate to escape and possibly collect some water to drink, he contemplates how the hell he survived that fall. And who the hell it was that saved him. There was no way he just magically stopped falling, right? Was this another ploy of the Gamemakers? It couldn't be. Why would they save his life again? Jumping off that cliff was his *own* crazy, stupid choice.

Mike paddles away in the cool, gentle waters when he hears the two tributes discover how he escaped. They're having some sort of discussion, and Mike can sense that one of them wants to jump in after Mike- boy, they really think he has something good in that bag, don't they? The other one sounds a bit hesitant, and rightfully so.

Mike decides to ignore them and focus on his escape, but then he hears two people screaming behind him and fall straight down... to their deaths. Mike doesn't take note of the sounds of them screaming or the impact of them colliding with the water. It only makes him swim faster.

But then he hears the sounds of two cannons and it makes him stop short. Maybe it's just a coincidence- two other tributes in the arena just happened to die, right at this moment, and the two tributes are swimming after him right now.

No such luck. Mike sees them partially submerged beneath the surface of the water, but their still, unmoving bodies let Mike know that they are most probably dead.

Mike's filled with a sense of horror. He... he just *killed* those two, didn't he?

No, no he didn't. They *chose* to jump off the cliff after him, Mike didn't tell them to do anything.

Yet Mike can't help but feel disgusted with himself. Sure, they were most certainly going to kill him, but knowing he's somewhat partially responsible for these two boys' deaths scares the hell out of Mike.

A hovercraft comes down to collect both of their bodies; this confirms that they really are dead. Mike gulps and submerges his head into the water because he feels like he's about to cry and he knows it's bad to

show weakness. But then he remembers that the dead bodies of those boys were in that same water and he lifts his head out in disgust.

Mike sighs. He's going to have to find another water source now, isn't he?

The sun above Mike disappears abruptly and he realizes that something big attached to a parachute is falling slowly towards him. Stepping aside and getting a closer look allows Mike to realize that he's just gotten an inflatable boat. And inside it is a rubber oar. Nancy must've sent it to him for good reason. Mike stands in reasonably shallow waters right now, and after swimming away the water is only up to his waist. The waters must definitely be going to get much deeper the further Mike goes then, which is why Nancy knows he's going to need a boat because he won't be able to swim for too long especially in waters that are too deep.

"Thanks Nancy," he murmurs as he climbs into the boat and grabs the oar to start rowing through the waters. He hopes there's a way out of this, that he'll be able to make it back to land and find his cave again.

However, Mike notices something inside the oar. It's hollowed out at the top and there's a note stuffed inside it. Mike smiles because it's a note from Nancy, most probably, and he's extremely grateful to be able to talk to his sister again. Maybe she left him instructions on how to get out of his current predicament.

The careful way the note has been hidden prompts Mike to be discreet in his extraction of it. He uses his backpack to hide the note from sight of any potential cameras that might be on him, and quietly reads the note as he pretends to row the boat.

MIKE WHEELER, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING JUMPING OFF THAT CLIFF LIKE THAT? YOU COULD HAVE DIED! No more reckless crap like that, okay? I'm so glad you survived that, although I have no idea how. Maybe you were light enough. BUT NO MORE JUMPING OFF CLIFFS. Try to get back to your cave before sundown. I haven't seen the layout of the place you're in because you're the first person to land up in that water and the cameras refuse to pan out. But from what I heard, the arena gets more dangerous at night. Please head back to your hideout and stay safe. Love you. -Nancy

Mike smiles as he finishes reading the note, his heart a lot lighter because it's only been less than a day but Mike misses Nancy so much. He thinks about his family and friends at home- were they just as angry at Mike as Nancy was for jumping off that cliff?

He smirks. It's not his first time jumping off a cliff- although that's not something to be proud of. He carefully tucks Nancy's note into his backpack and starts rowing as fast as he can. As happy as he is to hear from his sister, he's not nearly as excited that the arena gets more dangerous at night.

Mike rows for what must be hours when he comes across a waterfall. It's breathtakingly beautiful, and also is definitely not tainted with the dead bodies of those two tributes. Mike fills up his bottle and adds the right amount of iodine to the water before he recaps the bottle and continues rolling again. After sufficient time has passed, Mike takes a few large gulps of his water. He sighs in relief as the cool water slides down his throat, his thirst finally quenched. No longer does he have to worry about dying from dehydration in the near future.

But apparently, stopping to drink water instead of rowing the boat's a mistake. Before his very eyes, the once still and gentle currents transform into huge and violent waves- that are heading straight for Mike. He desperately keeps his water in his backpack and begins to row in the opposite direction as fast as he can.

It doesn't work. The waves catch up to Mike and this time there's no running. He holds desperately onto the boat as it gets swept up due to the waves. Then these waves get astronomically huge. They rise up so high it's not physically possible, so Mike knows this is definitely the Gamemakers' doing. If they were saving his life before, now they've decided it's time for Mike to die.

Mike rises up so high he sees dry land. Heck, he even sees the cliff he jumped off in the distance. Can any of the other tributes see him right now? Only that's not the priority here. Mike's struggling to hang onto the boat, but one strong wave sends him and his boat flying. The even bigger problem is that Mike's lost hold of the boat. He's falling backwards. It's much too high a height to fall from.

Mike screams again and knows he's not going to survive this. He's going to die, just like those two tributes, and a cannon that he won't be able to hear is going to sound.

Strangely, none of that happens. Mike is somehow lifted back up in the air and shoved back into the boat, his oar and backpack both intact. He starts hyperventilating as the boat slams back onto the water, and the waves are somehow forced back down, as if some other force is fighting against the Gamemakers, which can't be true. Mike spends a few minutes terrified as the waves rise then fall, over and over, which terrifies him even more than when they were just abnormally high.

But one thing's for sure though, Mike remains firmly attached to his boat throughout all this, as if some sort of protective force is keeping him safe, keeping him stuck on the boat.

Eventually, he supposes the Gamemakers give up because the waters grow still once more, and eventually Mike gets the courage to start rowing again. He's in a state of shock and confusion, as one might be after going through so many near-death experiences back to back.

Mike rows and rows and rows, and finally comes across dry land. He deflates his boat and manages to stuff that as well as his oar into his backpack. However, when he finishes this the sun's about to set and the sky is getting dark. Mike wants to attempt to make his way back to his cave, although he has no idea where to start.

Thankfully, Nancy chooses that moment to send him a gift. He grabs the parachute before it even reaches the ground and analyzes the small box to see if Nancy left a note. That probably shouldn't be the priority here, him caring more about a secret note from his sister than what expensive gifts his sponsors must've spent a fortune on to buy.

But still, Mike feels a sense of relief when he finds Nancy's note gently scrawled on the bottom of the box.

Head south. You're closer than you think!

His gift consists of a compass and a small bottle of poison. Mike

beams at the sight of these; Nancy seems to know just exactly what he needs and that gives him hope that between the two of them, maybe they can bring him home.

Mike takes a short break to chew on a cracker as well as dip all six of his darts in poison. Six darts. Those are good odds, right? He'll be able to kill a maximum of six tributes, and if he figures out a way to retrieve those bullets without getting himself poisoned in the process, maybe he can kill even more.

It's even darker when Mike finally starts making his way back to the cave, but Mike's less worried because anyone that attacks him now will have to face the fury of his gun.

Of course, his gun can't protect him from the eeriness he feels walking alone in the dark, unfamiliar arena. The sinking feeling that he's in danger- which is always the case in the arena, but that's besides the point. Mike doesn't know why, but it feels like the darker it gets, the more... strange the arena gets? It's weird, but it seems like the arena is transforming slowly, and it's more than just because it's now dark out.

Mike's actually relieved when the anthem that he so despises starts playing. The death recap is about to start, and even though it's not pleasant to think about who has died and see the faces of those two dead tributes, Mike finds that the light from the display floating in the sky makes the arena less creepy. And he can see better, so there's that.

Mike continues to find his way back to the cave throughout the entire anthem, walking faster and finding his way better. To his delight, Mike finds that rocky structure which he recognizes as the one leading up to his cave. He's close by. Mike sighs in delight at this and slows down, watching the death recap in its entirety.

He winces when he comes across the stony faces of the two dead tributes he ran into. They were from districts 8 and 9. And now they were dead. Thirteen tributes had died in all, with only eleven left to play.

Mike sighs at the thought of her again. But his thoughts are very

quickly interrupted when he hears a low growl right behind him.

Instinctively, Mike leaps away from the offending sound and finds himself face to face with... a monster. Mike nearly screams- Nancy had been right, the arena definitely seems to be more dangerous at night. No way were there creatures like this roaming the arena when it was still bright out.

Mike's frozen to the spot. He's not sure even his cave can protect him if this monster starts to give chase. Both Mike and the monster stay still for a few seconds, as if sizing each other up. Like Mike would even have a chance against this demon.

Except- he has a gun, doesn't he? It's in his hand right now, ready to be fired at anyone that threatens him. The moment the monster lunges forth to attack, Mike puts a bullet in him and starts running.

The bullet immobilizes the monster long enough for Mike to run- but not for long. Mike puts another bullet in the monster again, and makes a mad dash for his cave. By estimation, he's only 20 feet away from his hideout.

This time, the poison has less of an effect on the monster, so Mike puts two more darts in it before he reaches his cave.

Only to discover that it feels... slimy. Gross. Weird. It's not the same cave he left from earlier today, and Mike wonders exactly how different the arena gets at night. Even the ground he stands on feels off somehow.

Thinking about all this is a mistake, because Mike hears the monster catch up again and he fires his gun in shock. To his horror, this no longer has an effect and only makes the monster get angry as he charges towards Mike, who now desperately tries to get into his cave.

But he's too slow, or the monster's too fast- because before he can get through Mike's lifted up by the monster's gross claws. Mike starts to scream, kicking and pushing against the monster's grip. He doesn't care who hears him because even if all the tributes were to gather there right at this moment, the monster would still be the biggest threat to Mike's life.

The monster seems to make some sort of satisfied grunt as he lifts Mike up into the air, and Mike's screams turn into sobs and some sort of resignation as he prepares to get eaten by the monster. If he's lucky, the monster won't chew and he'll cut himself out with his knife later.

Except Mike doesn't get eaten. He hears a strange snap and opens his eyes to see the monster's neck twist. Mike falls out of its grasp and the monster lands in a heap on the ground.

Mike has no idea what's going on, but quickly moves away from the monster in case he wakes up again.

He looks up from the monster to see who saved him, who managed such a crazy feat.

Which is when he sees whom he feared he'd never see again. All of a sudden it feels like he's been sucker-punched, and Mike can't seem to breathe, but he runs toward her anyway.

"Eleven!"